

LITERARY ACTIVISM AND THE BLACK FEMNIST WOMAN WRITER: A STUDY OF
ALICE WALKER AND CAROLINA MARIA DE JESUS

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In this essay I examine the relationship between black feminism, writing, and the possible ways we might interpret black feminist women's writing as activism. I also explore the cross-cultural development of black feminism in the U.S. as compared to Brazil. The varying works of black feminist women, whose writing often reflects the intersectional places of oppression black women (and women of color) routinely face, perhaps unintentionally, creates safe spaces for black women to identify, reaffirm, and feel supported. Black feminism calls for the equitable treatment of all persons and proffers itself as both ideology and practice. Therefore, the *safe visibility* of black feminist women writers across the globe, a guarantee that is not always certain for black women, especially those in developing countries, is a necessary feat to combat. Safe visibility advocates for harassment free recognition, due payment for all works and basic respect for writers who help contribute to black feminist thought. Within this essay, a brief discourse about the ability for black feminism to safeguard black feminist writers and their words is of the utmost importance to highlight. Writers such as Alice Walker and Carolina Maria de Jesus, whom are further discussed in this essay, demonstrate the range of black feminist women writers to explore social inequalities and the undeniable ways black feminism, the women, writings and works, help maintain a sisterhood of accountability. It is only because of black feminism that I know of Carolina Maria De Jesus. Through her words, may she be seen, heard and advocated for more ever present.

KEYWORDS: Black Feminism, Literary Activism, United States, Brazil

1. Feminism

In order to discuss the ever pressing need to evaluate, create and nestle substantive and accessible measures of empowerment for women, it is important to discuss the means of authority that denies women complete autonomy under the guise of equality: patriarchy. Patriarchy prioritizes male or masculine superiority in ways that systemically enforces harmful gendered roles that oppress both men and women and often manifests through social, economic or political male dominance over women. Although the term “patriarchy” had already existed as a framework for anthropological studies of nomadic societies and the creation of cities, the term was popularized through Suffrage campaigners Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth and Elizabeth Stanton, who relentlessly argued for the recognition of women’s inherent ability to contribute just as much, if not more than their male counterparts, especially within political and social spheres in the U.S. Amongst property ownership, salary retention for women, joint custody, and a various discourses about the essential natures and roles of women, through Suffragists’ work, women were eventually granted the right to vote in America in 1920 (Vilchez 2012).

First Wave Feminism, describes the first collaborative movement within the 19th century that centered reforming inequalities women faced socially and legally (Vilchez 2012). First Wave Feminism masterfully demonstrated the need for a clear understanding of women’s marginal placement in society, the methodologies that places them there and a robust understanding of the political actions that centers and profits from systemic discrimination of women. As with all social movements though, none is without fault. First Wave Feminism started out with interrelated issues of temperance and the abolishment of slavery in addition to women’s voting rights. Unfortunately, as the Fifteenth Amendment legalized the voting rights of

black men, biological sex seemed to once again prevail in a seemingly bittersweet political equalizer. The identity politics that had rallied women and fueled abolitionist campaigns seemed to only serve the movement's male counterparts.

The passage of this amendment caused a division amongst suffragists and abolitionists who were now tasked with singularizing or expanding their political agenda, black male suffrage or women's suffrage. Inadvertently, this sex division weaponized racism against black women suffragists who were thereafter excluded from the movement. Amplifying women's issues proved a multi-range acquisition. This schism between black and white suffragists demonstrated the importance of representation, intersectionality, and diversified political strategizing.

2. Intersectional Feminism

Although members of First Wave Feminism attempted in the latter years of the movement to reintegrate black women, black women were for good cause, wary of rejoining. Second Wave Feminism is characterized by an increase in political activity for women cross globally in 1960 (Vilchez 2012). For activists in the U.S., the movement was concurrent with the Civil Rights Movement, as the two groups shared similar anti-war philosophies. As anti-war initiatives attuned to the diverse needs of people facing western imperialism, more pointed assessments of the needs of various minority groups *within* the U.S. found footing within Second Wave Feminism. Reproductive rights, femininity and sexuality were dominant issues during this wave (Rampton 2015). While perhaps stifled in recognition, this second wave movement garnered the support of individuals who fell outside the parameters of being middle class, cisgender, and white, reflecting a more inclusive feminism cognizant of the existence of women of color. The development of women only spaces emerged and eventually led to development of various ideological praxes.

Although Second Wave Feminism was more inclusive of women of color, the despondency between women considered the “in-group” insufficiently addressed the pressing needs of the “out-group,” people who were both black and woman. Therefore, black women, in order to amplify their very similar but inherently different mistreatments and discrimination on behalf of their sex and race, created their own kind of ideological feminism, in practice and theory.

Black Feminism

Black Feminist theories arose to address the mishandling of black woman feminists in prior feminist movements. Early feminist radicals such as Angela Davis commentated how, ““woman” was the test, but not every woman seemed to qualify. Black women, of course, were virtually invisible within the protracted campaign for woman suffrage” a popular critique that highlighted black women’s position: invisible (Davis 1982, p. 140). Writer Ashley Etemadi references in her *Feminist Theory Thursday* blog post a powerful quote by political activist, feminist and writer Assata Shakur, where Shakur boldly claims that, “black people will never be free unless Black women participate in every aspect of the struggle” (Etemadi 2017). In her article “Black Feminism and Intersectionality”, feminist theorist Sharon Smith acknowledges black legal scholar, feminist and author Kimberle Crenshaw as offering what is means to be “in every aspect of the struggle” citing Crenshaw’s 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” where Crenshaw coins the term “intersectional” (Smith 2014).

Intersectionality is the study of how the various intersections of class, race, sex and gender identity remain inextricably bound to each other in terms of how social or political equity is proffered or barred. Intersectionality notes that people’s various identities and makeups are

affected at differing frequencies in their fight for all around freedom. The discrimination black women particularly experience often does not fit the parameters of “neat legal categories of either “racism” or “sexism” (Smith 2014). The split of the first wave moment created separate black women salons and groups. Black Feminism became a popular political theory as it addressed the sexism and racism women of color experienced in both the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements. Black Feminism became an increasingly purported radical movement because of its commitment to struggling against racial, (hetero)sexual, class oppression for all and to amplify the voices of black women.

Womanism

“Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” states Alice Walker, womanist, poet, and activist whose term “womanist” arose in her 1983 book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden*. Womanism is described by Walker as the opposite of ““girlish” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious, a black feminist or feminist of color” (xii). It’s viewed as “a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually” or a woman who “appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength” (xi). A womanist “sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually” (xi). A womanist is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi). Womanism is a haven or refugee for those for whom “feminism,” due to its racist nuances, has all but desecrated the term “feminist.” Womanism functions as a safe place also because it is ideologically seen as a non-separatist movement as it “appears to provide an avenue to foster stronger relationships between black women and black men,” a critique that plagued earlier waves feminism (Collins 1996, p. 11). As with black feminism, the limits to both

ideological theories are seen in their inability to broaden support amongst those who are black and third world.

Black feminism does offer a praxis that seeks to include black women throughout the diaspora. Black feminism manifests in duplicitous ways and has burrowed a niche in writing. Black feminists such as those aforementioned continue to offer their feminist theories through writing whether for leisure, entertainment, profit, teaching, or as a form of resistance. No matter its function, black feminist writing can fashion between black women across the globe what society cannot readily offer nor sustain— reciprocity in sisterhood and community accountability. Black feminism is a conduit that not only harbors safe spaces for black women's sociopolitical thought, it also helps to mitigate the methodological erasure of the literary voices of black women in literature and feminist discourse.

Educational and economic barriers to women writers are an issue that plagues the dispersion of black feminist thought. Despite controlling those factors, “sporadic and narrowly circulating newsletters, position papers, journals, and magazines” resulted in the in-circling of feminist theories rather than its dispersal amongst various publication sectors (Gilliam 2013, p. 2). Gilliam states how “black women's intellectualism has traditionally been ignored due to a lack of access to education, the portrayal of black women as uneducated and the perception of black females as incapable of intellectual thought” (Gilliam 2013, p. 2).

Though, as Collins states, prioritizing a heightened visibility for black feminist women aides in social activism as:

This “outsider within” statue has provided a special standpoint on self, family, and society for Afro-American women. A careful review of the emerging Black feminist literature reveals that many Black intellectuals, especially those in touch with their

marginality in academic settings, tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class and gender (Collins 1986, p. 14-15).

Consequently, black feminist women writers, particularly due to their specific experiences with social marginalization, are sources of pointed examinations of society whose purview can contribute guidance on redressing social inequality. Therefore, the importance behind amplifying black women's feminist writing is that they serve as perpetual indicators of the conditions of our sociological issues and the maltreatment of those who are consistently affected. In the remainder of this essay, I will examine the literary activism of Black American feminist writer Alice Walker in addition to the political discourse of Afro-Brazilian feminist writer Carolina Maria De Jesus, women whose writing have had different levels of visibility and for which black feminism must continue to amplify.

3. Alice Walker and Political Action and Discourse in the U.S.

Alice Walker is a widely known Black American Feminist and Activist who grew up in a racially divided south. Walker found her solace in readings and in writing poetry. As a social worker, she became active in the Civil Rights Movement and began to gain recognition for her collection of poetry *Once*. After this first publication, Walker emerged as a proliferate voice in the black feminist movement. *The Color Purple*, Walker's most famous work, garnered her national acclaim. The novel was set in the early 1900s and explored how Celie, the novel's protagonist navigated her life under patriarchal and heteronormative domination. The black women within the novel all interact varyingly with patriarchy and the severity of its systemic reach.

Walker's *The Color Purple*, championed for various black women while challenging the myths of the uneducated black woman and the angry black woman, archetypes of black

women that were usually depicted in racist caricatures such as the Black Jezebel or the Mammy. Walker's story was nestled in a feminist story line. The novel features a dark skinned black woman, sisterhood among sex workers and menial labor women, cultural heritage as distanced but nuanced roots between Black American women and African women, and lastly, the inherent power and perseverance of black womanity.

Sisterhood functions as an overarching theme for the liberation of both Celie's body and her words. The relationships formed between Shug, Nettie, Sofia and Celie demonstrate the love language of sisterhood and the at times all too familiar burden of black womanhood. For these women, they share a relationship that is binding irrespective of blood, a sort of kinship that is formed thoroughly in their blackness. Their natural twists, hips, hair and skin all play important roles in their black womanity in as much as their words fortifies and reaffirms their humanness as black women, black lesbian women, black women of differing economic backgrounds, black women in all molds they might present.

This novel expertly highlights the afflictions black women face when viewed in the framework of the "strong black woman," a categorization of black women that at best frames them as unbreakable silent sufferers or plagues them with domestic violence at worst. *The Color Purple* accordingly, served as literary safe space for black women in 1985.

Three years after the novel's circulation in 1982, *The Color Purple* landed a big screen role. The impact of the novel turned film continues beyond screen play. Victoria Bond describes how:

Black women turned out in droves to see the film. We continue to reference it today because it breaks a certain cultural silence about abuse. Respectability politics imperil black women by demanding we stay mute; they insist that black people are a monolith

whose reputation must be protected and preserved, whatever the cost. This extends to art, which appears only to be acceptable if black characters are struggling to “get better,” to put checkered pasts firmly in the past. But the truth is obvious. We aren’t interested in stories about the perfect; we’re interested in stories about the real (Bond 2015).

Erica E. Townsend-Bell in her article *Writing the Way to Feminism*, recalls how “some scholars have noted the “explosion of writing by women of color” in the 1980s as one of the mechanisms by which other women of color were persuaded to enter the feminist movement and attitudes were transformed” (2012, p.128). Townsend-Bell then further explicates how this concept influences the reader to believe no feminist writings occurred prior to 1980. More so, Townsend-Bell argues that writing was a “mechanism for debate on the question of commonalities among women, the definition of feminism(s), and deliberation regarding the possibilities for a group called “women of color” or “third-world women” (2012, p. 129). This “amended focus was accomplished via a shift in control over the writing space” (2012, p. 129).

Walker’s literary ascent did not end with *The Color Purple* but the notoriety of the novel and film exemplifies not only the range of black feminist writers but also their ability to transcend written text. The fluidity of black women representation occurred in both text and film. This amplified image is what continues to herald *The Color Purple* as a timeless classic. It was made by a black woman, for black women and supported by black women. It is black feminism in action and a resistance of mainstream perceptions of black womanhood.

4. Afro-Brazilian Feminism

While Feminism in America has gone through various waves, women’s rights and feminism in Brazil has had slower growth. In 1932, Brazil granted women the right to vote following countries such as Canada and the United States, “a nation often admired by early

Brazilian feminists” says June E. Hahner in her article, “The Beginnings of the Women’s Suffrage Movement in Brazil” (1979, p. 200). Prior, in 1989, Brazilian women had attempted to demand their right to vote but could not counter the “male resistance or fears for the fate of the family and home” (Hahner 1979, p. 200). Brazilian women faced similar barriers to equitable treatment that women in other countries faced as well. Education, though accessed by an increasing number of women in the late nineteenth century proved still a topic of inaccessibility as (large segments of population remained illiterate” (Hahner 1979, p. 200). By 1920, various middle-class women were able to find employment outside of their homes and were in competition for government positions of high levels. Hahner characterizes this increase in women presence as an achievement aided by the conclusion of the First World War and the examples of other “advanced nations” but particularly “the personal links established between Brazilian feminists and international suffrage leaders, spurred the formation of formal women's rights organizations in Brazil” (Hahner 1979, p. 201).

Bertha Lutz is characterized as the principal leader of the suffrage movement in Brazil. Similarly to the feminist claims of American suffragists, Lutz argued that “Brazilian women also merited equality and political responsibilities” (Hahner 1979, p. 201). The Suffrage movement in Brazil held certain distinctions from Suffrage movements around the globe. For instance, although there was no marked opposition to women’s suffrage with regards to government, “the Brazilian suffragists lacked the English suffragettes' numbers and discipline and could not exert the same pressure on their government” (Hahner 1979, p. 202). In addition to this, Brazilian suffragists did not “believe that women would become conscious of their worth only through independence of men and male movements” (Hahner 1979, p. 202). Intermittent social adversities such as government corruption, a faltering economy and at times the dissolution of a

democratic political process further challenged the women's movement. Lastly, perhaps an overarching ideological difference that was far more divided among American feminists which differed from their Latin American feminist counterparts is how "Latin American feminists have rarely expressed a sense of competition with and isolation from men"; a notion from which they "tend to pride themselves on" (Hahner 1979, p. 202). There seemed to be no clear need to identify separately or center the separate needs of Brazilian women.

Despite this, Brazilian suffragists, though small, continued to organize. Following Vargas dictatorship where there were no elections held, Brazilian women gained the right to vote in 1946. In 1962, married women were given the liberty to work without prior authorization from their spouses, an ability to receive inheritance, and the right to ask for child custody. In 1988, the constitution under article five was rewritten to include women as having equals rights and duties as men. In 1996, a quota system was passed requiring that every political party held a minimum of 20% women. Although Brazilian feminists had orchestrated various accomplishments:

Afro-Brazilian women occupied marginal positions in both the Black and Feminist movements. Within the Black Movement males saw females as "helpers" while black and white females in the Feminist Movement clashed in ideological struggles over issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, and the importance of race in the feminist struggle. Indeed, while Brazilian women of all racial backgrounds considered themselves members of the Feminist movement, the majority was middle and upper class white women who refused to address race throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s (Gilliam 2013, p. 6).

5. Carolina Maria De Jesus and Political Action and Discourse in Brazil

Carolina Maria De Jesus is a widely unknown Afro-Brazilian feminist writer who lived in the shanty slums in Sao Paulo. *Child of Dark*, the novel that brought her widespread recognition featured her narrative as a black, poor and illegitimate woman in abject poverty. While in Brazil, it is evident that the scholarship of black women writers is faintly existent. De Jesus is regarded as Brazil's only favela writer to have published in 1960 (Yan 2014). De Jesus taught herself to read and write after her limited schooling in primary for only two years. De Jesus kept ethnographic records of her favela and did not adhere to societal cues such as marriage (Yan 2014).

Due to the excessive scenes of domestic violence she witnessed, De Jesus refused to marry, a thing that was uncommon at the time. The collection of diary entries that characterizes De Jesus' literary work highlighted the endemic poverty and struggle for humanity that circumvented the residents of favelas. De Jesus' accounts of hunger, poverty and the maltreatment of poor black women reflected a narrative that was all but seen in literature of the same time. The publishing of De Jesus' "Child of Dark" gave her international recognition but in a twisted sense of marginalization and fraud, De Jesus was denied the royalties of her translated writing and continued to struggle to make ends meet up until she died (Yan 2014).

De Jesus' life as an Afro-Brazilian feminist writer reflects how the "Afro-Brazilian female writing tradition has historically been absent due to the critical establishment's failure to include their production in the mainstream literary canon" (Gilliam 2013, p. 9). Leia Maria, a student at Fundação Escola Técnica Liberato Salzano Vieira da Cunha, describes her relationship with the favela writing as being limited to only "a few poems a few times in school," while describing how "while [she] was studying Brazilian literature [they] read a lot of books that were

written by men.” Maria was introduced to De Jesus by a black woman professor. Her description of the lack of women writers in literature harrowingly mimics De Jesus own examination of the lack of women in positions of political power. De Jesus illustrates an exchange with her mother where De Jesus describes how:

When I was a girl my dream was to be a man to defend Brazil, because I read the history of Brazil and became aware that war existed. I read the masculine names of the defenders of the country, then I said to my mother why don't you make me become a man. She replied “if you walk under a rainbow, you'll become a man” When a rainbow appeared I went running in its direction (De Jesus 1962, p. 47).

In her novel, De Jesus aptly describes the conditions of her favela with intentional prose lined with entries of poetic drama, sentimental musings of sweet days and a jarring illustration of favela life. In an entry that alludes to her writing as an escape, De Jesus describes how she:

Got out of bed to write. When I write I think I live in a golden castle that shines in the sunlight. The woods are silver and the panes are diamonds. My view is overlooking a garden and I gaze on flowers of all kinds. I must create this atmosphere of fantasy to forget that I am in a favela (De Jesus 1962, p. 52).

De Jesus' commentary reflects the reality of poverty that poor women must endure often alone. Her blackness is then reaffirmed in subtle entries that hint at a sense of self love that is widely unapparent or socially accepted. Vera Daisy, an Afro-Brazilian Journalist who researches and reports on the social movement of Black feminism in Brazil describes how Afro-Brazilian women live “in a country marked by racism” but that “black women maintain their families in all facets of their life” (2017). She notes that it is “structural forces that keep black women invisible” especially in “literary history” (2017). Despite the systemic features of Brazil that

render black women invisible, De Jesus describes a thorough sense of pro-blackness when describing an exchange between her and a few directors of a circus who exclaimed to De Jesus “It’s a shame you’re black” (De Jesus 1962, p. 57). In an internal dialogue with herself, De Jesus mentions how “they were forgetting that I adore my black skin and my kinky hair. The negro hair is more educated than the white man’s hair. Because with negro hair, where you put it, it stays. It’s obedient...If reincarnation exists I want to come back black” (De Jesus 1962, p. 57).

What should be maintained about De Jesus is the authors’ own descriptions of the liberative power of writing. She states throughout her novel, “I pick up paper. I’m proving that I’m alive, at least” (De Jesus 1962, p. 12). On another account, De Jesus says “when I’m nervous I don’t like to argue. I prefer to write. Every day I write. I sit in the yard and write” (1962, p. 15). De Jesus’ minimal visibility occurs at the hands of structural powers but is being amplified by the Afro-Brazilian feminist scholars. The safe place that De Jesus creates in her novel is commentary for all people suffering from the burden of social marginalization and similar to Walker’s *The Color Purple*, reaffirms the functionality of black feminist writing as sources of power, liberation and voice. De Jesus continues to slowly but surely find prominence as an important contributor to Brazil’s Afro-Brazilian feminist thought, as the vehicle, black feminism, ought to perpetually foster a home for black feminist women writers.

The concept of women’s empowerment isn’t just a discussion of amplifying voices, it must conceptually argue for the transparency and representation of all women. As with popular feminist movements, the notion of invisibility seemed widespread but the reality of the scope demonstrated far more stratified accesses to visibility for women of color, disabled women and queer women. Globally, the lack of equitable women’s rights is an epidemic issue that must be unrooted but ignorance of the social problems women of color face due to race and sex amongst

class and gender identification is often side swept, ignored or insufficiently redressed, a consistent mishandling of black women that is pandemic to women's rights and feminism.

The work of redressing global inequalities all women face must involve the examination of the barriers that plague black women's visibility. Black feminist scholars have already begun to pave the way. Black womanhood or sisterhood counteracts these barriers. Social activism to address women's issues was long thought to reside in sociopolitical spheres and institutional law. Black feminists, womanists and writers of that genre and school of thought have demonstrated the ability for authorship, writing and scholarship to function as safe places to contest a white supremacist, capitalist and cishetero-patriarchal society that routinely erases black bodies, especially women. Black Feminist women writers and their scholarship is social activism because their resistance begins in the body and we must be willing to hear their words.

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